FIRST-LANGUAGE-INFLUENCED COLLOCATIONAL ERRORS AMONG GRADE 8–9 STUDENTS: A CLASSIFICATION AND CORPUS-BASED REMEDIAL TASKS

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Abstract. Collocational errors are among the most persistent errors made by learners of English, and a substantial proportion are associated with first-language influence. This article examines collocational errors made by Grade 8–9 students in general secondary schools in the Bukhara region and classifies errors arising from transfer from Uzbek. Five types of L1-influenced error are identified: confusion of delexical verbs, literal transfer of verbs, transfer of adjectives and intensifiers, Russian-mediated transfer, and transfer of case suffixes into grammatical collocations. For each error type, remedial tasks drawing on the SkELL and COCA corpora are proposed within the author's "Corpus Detective" exercise system. The article argues that contrastive analysis combined with guided corpus consultation helps learners notice differences between Uzbek and English word combinations and independently correct their errors.

Keywords: collocational errors, first-language influence, Uzbek learners, contrastive analysis, corpus, SkELL, COCA, data-driven learning, general secondary school.

Introduction

A student who writes "I did a big mistake" or "I drink medicine every morning" produces a sentence that is intelligible and may appear grammatically well formed, yet a native speaker of English immediately notices its non-idiomatic phrasing. This illustrates that knowing the meanings of individual words is insufficient: learners must also know which words conventionally occur together in English. Such conventional word combinations, or collocations, may seem illogical from a learner's perspective. For example, the meaning of heavy alone does not explain why English uses "heavy rain" rather than "strong rain," while "strong tea," rather than "heavy tea," is conventional [1; 17].

For Uzbek learners, this difficulty is compounded by structural differences between Uzbek and English. Uzbek is an agglutinative Turkic language in which many grammatical relations are expressed through case suffixes rather than prepositions. Moreover, Uzbek verbal expressions are frequently formed using general verbs such as qilmoq ("do/make") and bermoq ("give"). Many students in the Bukhara region also have some knowledge of Russian, providing a second potential source of transfer. When a learner does not know an English collocation, a natural strategy is to translate an Uzbek or Russian expression word for word. This produces an error that the learner may not recognize as such.

In general secondary education, Grades 8–9 mark a stage at which students begin producing longer texts, including letters, short essays, and oral presentations. It is therefore appropriate to address collocational errors systematically at this level. The article has two objectives: first, to describe and classify first-language-influenced collocational errors among Uzbek learners in Grades 8–9; and second, to propose corpus-based tasks that help students independently notice and correct these errors.

Literature Review

The importance of collocations for language learners has been recognized since J. Sinclair introduced the "idiom principle." According to this principle, speakers do not construct every sentence word by word; instead, they draw on an extensive repertoire of partially prefabricated expressions [17]. M. Lewis and his colleagues developed this insight into the lexical approach, arguing for the explicit and systematic teaching

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of collocations [14]. S. Granger showed that even advanced learners underuse natural collocations and overrely on a limited repertoire of "safe," general-purpose combinations [9].

The role of the first language in collocational errors has received considerable attention in the literature. J. Bahns argued that collocations with straightforward translation equivalents in the learner's first language require relatively little explicit teaching, whereas those that differ across languages deserve greater attention [1]. N. Nesselhauf found that almost half of the verb–noun collocation errors in a learner corpus could be explained by L1 influence [15]. B. Laufer and T. Waldman observed a similar pattern among Hebrew-speaking learners, noting that such errors persist even at advanced levels [13]. Psycholinguistic studies by J. Yamashita and N. Jiang [19] and B. Wolter and H. Gyllstad [18] found that collocations with L1 equivalents tend to be processed more quickly and accurately. This indicates that the first language continues to shape the mental lexicon of second-language users.

Two pedagogical implications follow from this research. First, B. Laufer and N. Girsai demonstrated that contrastive analysis and translation tasks raise learners' awareness of differences between their first and target languages and improve retention of collocations [12]. Second, data-driven learning, as advocated by T. Johns [11], enables learners to test their hypotheses against authentic language data. A meta-analysis by A. Boulton and T. Cobb confirmed the positive contribution of corpus use to language learning [7]. For secondary school students, SkELL [6] offers an accessible interface, whereas COCA [8] provides frequency information and a wider range of contexts. Nevertheless, collocational errors specific to Uzbek learners and ways of addressing them with corpus tools remain insufficiently investigated. The present article seeks to address this gap.

Methodology

The study was conducted within the framework of an educational experiment carried out during the 2025–2026 academic year in 13 general secondary schools in the Bukhara region (one school from each district and the two cities), involving approximately 1,500 students in Grades 8–9 [3]. The data consisted of students' written work (letters, emails, and short essays on textbook topics) and teachers' notes on students' performance of oral tasks.

The analysis followed the stages of error analysis described by C. James [10]. First, collocational errors were identified and checked against the SkELL and COCA corpora: an expression was treated as erroneous when it was absent from the corpora or occurred markedly less frequently than an alternative conveying the intended meaning. Each error was then compared with its Uzbek and Russian equivalents. If the erroneous expression reproduced the structure or lexical choices of its Uzbek or Russian counterpart, it was classified as a transfer-induced error. Errors were grouped according to the component of the collocation affected by transfer. Finally, remedial tasks were developed for each type within the six-stage "Corpus Detective" system (noticing, searching, analyzing, practicing, using in speech or writing, and reflecting) and made available on the "CORPUS-BASED COLLOCATIONS' LAB" website [4; 5].

Results and Discussion

The analysis identified five types of collocational errors associated with first-language influence. Table 1 presents typical learner errors in each category, their Uzbek or Russian sources, and the corresponding conventional English collocations.

Table 1. Types of first-language-influenced collocational errors among Uzbek students in Grades 8–9

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Error type	Learner error	Uzbek/Russian source expression	Conventional English collocation
1. Confusion of delexical verbs	do a mistake; make homework; do a phone call	xato qilmoq (make a mistake); uy vazifasini qilmoq (do homework); qo‘ng‘iroq qilmoq (make a phone call)	make a mistake; do homework; make a phone call
2. Literal transfer of verbs	drink medicine; wash teeth; see a dream; give a question; give attention	dori ichmoq (literally “drink medicine”); tish yuvmoq (“wash teeth”); tush ko‘rmoq (“see a dream”); savol bermoq (“give a question”); e’tibor bermoq (“give attention”)	take medicine; brush teeth; have a dream; ask a question; pay attention
3. Transfer of adjectives and intensifiers	strong rain; bitter tea; rough mistake	kuchli yomg‘ir (“strong rain”); achchiq choy (“bitter tea”); qo‘pol xato (“rough mistake”)	heavy rain; strong tea; serious mistake
4. Russian-mediated transfer	make a photo; read a lecture; visit lessons; pass an exam (in the sense of “sit/take an exam”)	сделать фото (“make a photo”); читать лекцию (“read a lecture”); посещать уроки (“visit lessons”); сдавать экзамен (“take an exam”)	take a photo; give a lecture; attend lessons; take an exam
5. Transfer of case suffixes into grammatical collocations	listen music; interested to music; angry to him; arrive to Tashkent; depend from	musiqa tinglamoq (“listen to music,” without a case suffix); musiqaga qiziqmoq (“be interested in music”); unga jahli chiqmoq (“be angry with him”); Toshkentga yetib kelmoq (“arrive in Tashkent”); зависеть от (“depend on”)	listen to music; interested in music; angry with him; arrive in Tashkent; depend on

Errors in Categories 1 and 2 were the most frequent in the students’ texts. This finding is consistent with N. Nesselhauf [15] and B. Laufer and T. Waldman [13], who also identified verb–noun combinations as particularly susceptible to first-language influence. Category 1 merits special attention. The Uzbek verb qilmoq can correspond to both make and do in English; consequently, the learner has no clear distinction in the first language on which to base the choice and may select the verb arbitrarily. Category 4 demonstrates that transfer is not restricted to the first language: Russian, as a widely used additional language, can also become a source of interference. Category 5 reflects structural differences between the languages. Uzbek case suffixes, particularly the dative suffix -ga, are mapped onto the English preposition to regardless of the verb or adjective involved.

For each error type, the following remedial sequence was developed within the “Corpus Detective” system:

1. Noticing. Learners receive “mirror cards” containing an Uzbek expression, its literal English translation produced by a learner, and a question mark. They judge whether the English combination sounds natural. As B. Laufer and N. Girsai showed, contrastive awareness is the first step toward correcting transfer-induced errors [12].

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2. Searching. Learners check both their original expressions and possible alternatives in SkELL (for example, “strong rain” and “heavy rain”). Their own version is either unattested or markedly less common in the corpus, making the problem visible even without an explicit explanation from the teacher [5].

3. Analyzing. Using SkELL’s “Word Sketch” feature or COCA concordance lines, learners identify which verbs or adjectives typically combine with a noun (for example, medicine: take, prescribe; rain: heavy, light). For Category 1, students sort nouns into make and do groups and attempt to infer patterns themselves, such as the frequent association of make with creating or producing something.

4. Practicing. Learners complete gap-filling, matching, and odd-one-out tasks based on corpus examples, as well as reverse-translation exercises from Uzbek into English.

5. Using the target expressions. Learners write a short text or prepare an oral account using at least five target collocations. They then check questionable combinations through the “Mark – Check – Compare – Rewrite” procedure [2].

6. Reflecting. Learners record each corrected error alongside its first-language expression and conventional English equivalent in a personal list of “Uzbek–English Collocation Pairs.”

Because these error types can be anticipated, teachers can address them before they become entrenched rather than merely correcting them afterwards. During the educational experiment, the rate of accurate collocation use among students in the experimental groups reached 70–80% [3]. Observations further showed that after seeing the predominance of forms such as “heavy rain” and “take medicine” in corpus evidence, students began to check other uncertain combinations independently. This supports the view that noticing a discrepancy between one’s own language use and authentic input is central to acquiring collocations [16; 4]. Nevertheless, teacher guidance remained necessary in the early stages: concordance lines were initially selected and simplified in advance, and full corpus searches were introduced gradually.

Conclusion

Collocational errors made by Uzbek students in Grades 8–9 are not random. A substantial proportion result from literal transfer from Uzbek and, to some extent, Russian. Five types were identified: confusion of delexical verbs, literal verb transfer, transfer of adjectives and intensifiers, Russian-mediated transfer, and transfer of case suffixes into grammatical collocations. Because these errors are predictable, preventive teaching is possible. Combining contrastive “mirror” tasks with guided searches in the SkELL and COCA corpora allows learners to see the gap between L1-based assumptions and authentic English usage and gradually learn to verify and correct their collocations independently. The proposed classification and tasks can be used by English teachers in general secondary schools. They can also serve as a basis for compiling a list of collocations that are especially prone to error among Uzbek learners. Future research could develop such a list using a larger corpus of written work produced by Uzbek students.

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